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BEAUTY AND DATING CHOICE--OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE REALITY

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Abstract

Experimenters photographed 105 couples at a high school dance and obtained detailed self-report measures from each partner. A panel of judges rated each partner's physical attractiveness from the photographs. Partners were found to be similar in attractiveness, and feelings of "love" expressed by the two members of each pair were highly correlated. Subjects' ratings of their own attractiveness were poorly related to judges' ratings, but subjects' ratings of their dates' attractiveness correlated significantly with the judges' ratings. Subjects' ratings of their dates' attractiveness were distorted by the subject's expressed degree of "love," with this effect more striking for females than for males.

BEAUTY AND DATING CHOICE--OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE REALITY[1]

Recent research has shown that physical attractiveness exerts a strong effect upon interpersonal attraction (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). Even in the 1800's the effect of attractiveness upon heterosexual selection was acknowledged. Darwin (1871) discussed physical attractiveness in a section of The Origin of the Species and the Descent of Man entitled "The Influence of Beauty in Determining the Marriages of Mankind." He commented that "In civilized life man is largely, but by no means exclusively, influenced in the choice of his wife by external appearance (p. 881)."

One hundred years later it seems as if "civilized" men--and women--are still largely influenced by physical attractiveness. A number of current studies in social psychology have examined the relationship between physical attractiveness and liking in heterosexual relationships. One of the most frequently tested hypotheses is that partners like each other more when they are similar in physical attractiveness. Darwin (1871) stated the case for the matching of individuals of similar levels of attractiveness in terms of sexual selection: "It may be suggested that in some cases a double process of selection has been carried on; that the males have selected the more attractive females and the latter the more attractive males (p. 582)." This presumably would leave the less attractive of each sex to choose each other--albeit reluctantly.

It may be, however, that these latter choices are not so reluctant after all. Walster, E., Aronson, Abrahams, and Rottman (1966) developed a matching hypothesis of social choice, testing predictions which they derived from Level of Aspiration Theory (cf Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, and Sears, 1944).

They expected that individuals would prefer to date and would like best partners of a similar level of attractiveness as themselves. This study used a computerized blind date situation to examine the relationship between attractiveness and heterosexual liking. Walster et al. and several similar studies which followed this format (Brislin & Lewis, 1968; Tesser & Brodie, 1971) found a significant main effect for physical attractiveness (everyone preferred the more attractive partner) rather than the hypothesized "matching effect."

Later computer date studies which introduced the possibility of acceptance/rejection which is present in more realistic dating situations did find a matching effect, with less attractive subjects being willing to choose less attractive dates than more attractive subjects (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Stroebe, Insko, Thompson, & Layton, 1971).

Still other investigators have moved from artificial dating situations into field studies of the similarity of physical attractiveness of actual dating couples. Silverman (1971) reported a high degree of similarity between the attractiveness ratings of dating partners observed in naturalistic situations. Udry (1971) suggested in a critique of Silverman's article that the degree of matching obtained may not have been significantly more than that expected by chance, since the attractiveness scores of most individuals would fall within the mid-range of Silverman's scale of attractiveness. Udry also pointed out that a halo effect from one partner to another might have arisen because the partners were rated together.

Murstein (1972) conducted two studies designed to avoid these problems. The degree of matching among groups of steady or engaged couples was compared with that of a control group of "couples" formed by randomly pairing the

attractiveness scores of the same men and women. Murstein found that the degree of matching among actual couples was significantly greater than that of the control "couples;" that the self-ratings of an individual's physical attractiveness correlated significantly with his ratings by objective judges; and that individuals' ratings of their partners were less accurate because of an overestimation of the partner's attractiveness.

Method

Color slides were made of dating couples at a high school Junior-Senior prom, and each member of each couple completed a questionnaire providing information about himself and his date. A panel of judges later rated the physical attractiveness of subjects from the photographs, and the correlations among attractiveness ratings and questionnaire items were computed. Data were collected in 1973 and 1974.

In 1973 photographs were taken of 37 dating couples at the prom. In 1974, 65 additional couples--none of whom had participated in the 1973 study--were photographed. All photographs were posed and taken under the same conditions, using Ektachrome X color slide film in a small 35mm Canonet camera with flash attachment, mounted on a tripod. The photographs showed each couple down to about the waist. Each couple was identified by a number hung on the wall behind them. After being photographed, the partners went to separate tables and completed questionnaires (with confidentiality assured) giving personal background data, ratings of their own and their date's attractiveness, the degree to which they were "in love" with their date, and other information about their relationship. Questionnaires were marked with the same number shown in the photograph.

In 1973, 55 undergraduate judges (14 males and 41 females) rated each subject's attractiveness from the photographs on a 7-point scale. In 1974, 80 undergraduate judges (40 male and 40 female) rated the additional subjects. The 7 points on the rating scale were anchored by the words very unattractive (1), unattractive (2), slightly unattractive (3), neither attractive nor unattractive (4), slightly attractive (5), attractive (6), and very attractive (7). The order in which photographs were shown was varied for different judges, and each photo was rated with only one partner shown at a time to avoid any halo effect which might arise from seeing the two partners together.

Results

The 1973 and 1974 data were analyzed together, with correlations computed among such variables as objective (judges') and subjective (subjects') ratings of each partner's physical attractiveness, degree of being "in love" expressed by each partner, and several derived scores concerning discrepancies between judges' and subjects' ratings of physical attractiveness. (For all correlations reported below, $df = 103$, $p < .01$ unless otherwise indicated.)

Reliability of attractiveness ratings. Judges were given no training on the use of the attractiveness rating scale, and since attractiveness is such a subjective matter there might be a question as to the reliability of the judges' ratings. For each year's data correlations were computed among male and female judges' ratings of male and female subjects. From the resulting 5155 correlations, 4 random samples of 30 rs each were selected and averaged (via Fisher's z_r transformation) to represent mean agreement among males judging males, males judging females, females judging females, and females judging males. Mean rs for the 4 conditions were .35, .52, .50 and

.55 respectively. Reliability seemed adequately high, especially given the large number of judges on the panels. It may be noted that the least reliable ratings were made by males judging males. Curran (1973) reported judges in general were less accurate in rating physical attractiveness for male than for female subjects.

Similarity of partners. For true physical attractiveness, as defined by the average rating of all judges for a given subject, there was a significant but not impressively strong matching between male and female members of a pair (r = .30). (This correlation was high in the 1973 data, r = .52, 36 df, and low in 1974, r = .16, 64 df, n.s., but we saw no reason to accept either figure as more accurate than the combined figure.) Partners were also similar in their responses to the question "How much are you 'in love' with your date?". Feelings of love expressed by the male and female member of each pair were highly correlated (r = .71).

Accuracy of subjects' perceptions. The accuracy of the subjects' ratings of their own and their dates' attractiveness was assessed by correlating these ratings with the "objective" attractiveness ratings made by the judges. Subjects saw their dates more accurately than themselves. Subjects' ratings of their dates' attractiveness correlated significantly with the judges' ratings of the dates' attractiveness (r = .26 and .32 for male and female subjects, respectively). Subjects' ratings of their own attractiveness, however, were another matter. The males' ratings of their own attractiveness were not significantly correlated with the judges' ratings (r = .08, n.s.), while the females' self-ratings were only marginally significant (r = .16, $p < .05$).

There did not seem to be any particular modesty among the subjects. Subjects rated themselves higher than they were rated by judges, and rated their partners even higher than they rated themselves. On the 7-point attractiveness scale judges gave overall mean ratings of 4.2, subjects rated themselves 5.4, and subjects rated their partners 6.0. While unknown bias may have been involved in our method of obtaining ratings from subjects--in a setting where they were excited and preparing for an evening of fun--subjects' inflated scores may also be related to the prestige value which Waller (1937) suggests may result from association with attractive people. Sigall and Landy (1973) have shown that the evaluation of a male by casual observers is positively related to the degree of physical attractiveness of his romantic partner. Perhaps subjects are inclined to exaggerate the perceived attractiveness of their partners in order to bolster their self-esteem.

Being in love also caused subjects systematically to distort their perceptions of their dates' attractiveness. Subjects who reported being more in love (on a 7-point scale) saw their partners as more attractive, with this effect somewhat stronger for females (r = .49) than for males (r = .25). A distortion score was computed by subtracting each subject's rating of his or her date's attractiveness from the judges' ratings of the date's attractiveness. This distortion score correlated significantly with the degree of love expressed by females (r = .45), but not with that expressed by males (r = .03, n.s.).

Equity. Equity theory might predict that the less attractive member of a pair would compensate by bringing more feelings of "love" to the relationship. However, such an effect was not observed. Differences in reported love brought to the situation were unrelated either to differences

in perceived attractiveness (computed from subjects' ratings of self and date; for males, r = .00, for females, r = .12, n.s.) or to differences in actual attractiveness (computed from judges' ratings of the two partners (r = .00).

Discussion

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that matching for physical attractiveness occurs to a limited degree in naturalistic dating situations. Subjects' perceptions of the attractiveness of their partners seem vulnerable to distortion by interpersonal factors--here particularly the expressed degree of love in the relationship--with this distortion more striking for females than for males. Judges' ratings of subjects' attractiveness were poorly related to subjects' ratings of their own attractiveness, but both male and female subjects' ratings of their dates' attractiveness were correlated significantly with the judges' ratings.

Many of the previous studies in the area of physical attractiveness have utilized simulated dating situations in which the effects of variables such as attractiveness may be qualitatively different from their effects in real-life relationships. Physical attractiveness is often presented as an objective, stable variable which influences behavior in a relatively consistent fashion. The results of the present study suggest that subjective or perceived attractiveness may itself be influenced or distorted by other interpersonal variables. Careful consideration should thus be given to the nature of the interpersonal relationships when working with physical attractiveness. At first glance, attractiveness may seem to be straightforward and visible to a casual judge, but the implications are that perceived physical attractiveness is more than skin deep. Beauty lies partly in the eye of the beholder, especially when the beholder is in love.

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Footnote

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